

# Russian Radical Nationalist Interpretation of the French Riots of November 2005

LUKASZ JURCZYSZYN

**Abstract:** This article is based on the analysis of empirical data collected during eight months of fieldwork—in the provincial town of Kondopoga, St. Petersburg, and Nizhny Novgorod. During this period, 56 individual and 16 collective interviews were conducted. The paper provides the main result of this comparative research on the urban riots in France and Russia, which is related to the media. More precisely, the importance of “global” factors linked to collective violence in these urban spaces was observed. The phenomenon could be called “global circulation of national imaginaries.” Indeed, it was detected that the riots of November 2005 in France, due to their widespread international media coverage, became a source for various interpretations for Russian (more or less organized) ultranationalists.

**Keywords:** democracy, media, nationalist/racist violence, riot, social and racial discrimination

This article is based on a larger comparative research project concerning riots that took place in France, Russia and Poland, analyzed as a “test” for a local social environment. The investigation, which took place between December 2005 and July 2010, was initially part of a doctoral thesis in sociology prepared at the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, or EHESS) in Paris. It also concerns a project called “Understanding Violence in Russia: War, Institutions, Society.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, from the beginning, one of the main motivations behind the investigation was to go beyond strict national research frameworks and to reach more “global” perspectives by analyzing three societies that are not often compared.

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In order to present the main theme of this article, the overall context of this comparative research must be outlined first. The research was framed around two types of collective violence:

(1) Social violence, specifically the riots in the Paris suburbs that took place in Val-Fourré in November 2005 (Mantes-la-Jolie, Yvelines, 22,000 residents, situated about 55 km from Paris), compared to those that occurred in Villiers-le-Bel in November 2007 (Val-d'Oise, 27,000 residents, about 25 km from Paris).

(2) Nationalist/racist violence involving, in both the Russian and Polish cases, members of the ethnic majorities (including radical nationalists) against ethnic minorities.

First analyzed are the riots in Kondopoga (Republic of Karelia,<sup>2</sup> 34,000 residents, situated about 300 km from St. Petersburg), where in September 2006 young Chechens “exploded” into violence against young Russians, killing two of them. This led to a four-day riot conducted by young Russians, including the ultranationalists, against “Caucasians” (destruction of restaurants, shops, and cars, generally demanding their expulsion from the town, which took place), and against the local authorities (clashes with state police). In Nizhny Novgorod (1,300,000 residents, Russia’s fourth-largest city, located about 400 km from Moscow), one of the ultimate objectives was to examine collective violence: both racist (including homicides of migrants committed by radical nationalists), and those that resulted from confrontation between ultranationalist and anti-racist youth movements. In this town, racist violence provoked the violent reaction of young so-called “anti-racists” (in Russia, more commonly defined as “anti-fascists”) who have for the last four years been using weapons such as knives and pistols. In Poland, the research sought to understand the collective violence in Brzeg (38,000 residents, located in the Opole Voivodeship), where in January 2008 a young Roma “exploded” into a violent act against several young Polish citizens of this small town. This “unexpected” defensive violence met an extreme reaction of the crowd of about 40 young people, who wanted to burn the Roma’s apartment using Molotov cocktails.

This article is based on the analysis of empirical data collected during eight months of fieldwork, in the provincial town of Kondopoga, St. Petersburg, and Nizhny Novgorod. During this period, 56 individual and 16 collective interviews were conducted. The two most productive methods were participative observation in groups of radical youth (four months in Kondopoga and two months in Nizhny Novgorod) and focus groups (two in Kondopoga and two in Nizhny Novgorod). The approach of four focus groups was inspired by some fundamental objectives of the sociological intervention method, which the French sociologist Alain Touraine<sup>3</sup> invented in order to analyze social movements. This qualitative method is designed as an analytical process by which collective actors are enabled to accede to certain forms of self-awareness. Focus groups seemed pertinent in order to analyze collective social action such as riots, racist attacks, and activities resulting from engagement in a socio-cultural movement (nationalist or anti-racist). More precisely, the main goal of the focus groups was not only to distinguish the meaning of a collective action and to test the hypothesis among actors, but also to enable social and auto-reflection and action beyond the physical violence. The participants of such constructed groups were recruited from the subjects who had already been questioned in the context of an individual or

collective interview. All of them were also related and situated within the actual local conflict. Nevertheless the subjects, who presented exceedingly radical confrontation attitudes, were not taken into account. For instance, in Kondopoga the researchers established a unique space for a debate between the members of ethnic minorities (Uzbeks/Kyrgyz and Chechens), the local officials, and the youth, including those who had participated in the racially-driven riots. Then in Nizhny Novgorod, one focus group was held to stimulate an exceptional dialogue between nine people related to the research question. They mostly situated themselves in opposition to the local authorities: two National Bolsheviks (National Bolshevik Party – NBP), two anarchists from Autonomous Action (Avtonomnoe Deystvie – AD), representatives of the Georgian and Tajik minorities, delegates of Drugaya Rossiya and Intersoyuz, the head of the Council of Human Rights in Nizhny Novgorod, and the head of the Help Center for Migrants. In the frame of the other focus group in this town, one radical nationalist and his “anti-racist” opponent were also questioned. In this case, the local “adversaries” who took part in the research wanted “to try to understand why in nowadays Russia the young radical people have been progressively killing themselves instead of thinking and acting together against the social and institutional violence” (Vovka, 22 years old, conservatory student, a local ultranationalist leader).

According to the main theme of this article, the empirical investigation in Kondopoga and Nizhny Novgorod pointed to a central result related to the media, developed due to this comparative research. More precisely, the importance of “global” factors linked to collective violence in these urban spaces was observed. The phenomenon could be called “global circulation of national imaginaries.” Indeed, it was detected that the riots of November 2005 in France, due to their widespread international media coverage, became a source for various interpretations for Russian ultranationalists. When the riots began in France in November/December 2005, the news quickly spread abroad. The different forms of the French national imaginary, produced by French public opinion-makers in the context of the riots, were then received and interpreted by Russian information producers. Then, again, it was received and interpreted by the interlocutors from Kondopoga, St. Petersburg, and Nizhny Novgorod.

To clarify, it seems that specifically the French national imaginary of “urban violence of dangerous youth from the suburbs”—who during the riots were regularly represented on French television and in the majority of the newspapers as “immigrant/criminals”—influenced the interpretation of the riots that several Russian opinion makers and radical nationalists framed in terms of “the threat of dangerous immigrants for the majority of society.” In other words, the global circulation of national imaginaries refers to a mechanism according to which the Russian nationalists actually interpret the French riots of November 2005 from the Russian context of nationalist and racist tensions. To some extent, the interviewed leaders of the nationalist/racist riots of Kondopoga in 2006 justified their actions by referring to the French riots in 2005. They generally wanted and would like to avoid the catastrophic example of European migration policy. In that case, the Russian ultranationalists feel as though they face the same danger as the majority of French society: being menaced by immigrants with North and Sub-Saharan African backgrounds. The notion of global circulation of national imaginaries was inspired by two major concepts: (1) imagined communities in the era of cultural globalization

“on the move” that Arjun Appadurai has proposed;<sup>4</sup> and (2) national imaginary developed by Benedict Anderson.<sup>5</sup>

### **The French Riots of November 2005**

Before giving the examples of interpretation of the French riots established by the Russian radical nationalists from the two studied urban spaces, it is crucial to give certain details concerning the “real” context and significations of these acts of violence. The French riots of November 2005, which are at the heart of this comparative problem, had an impact that had never occurred in the contemporary history of France. The riots began on Thursday, October 27, spurred by the deaths of two teenagers (Zyed Benna, 17, and Bouna Traoré, 15) in Clichy-sous-Bois, a poor commune in an eastern Paris suburb. The riots ended on November 16. In fact, it was a series of riots in nearly 280 communes in various parts of France involving mainly the burning of cars and public buildings. Thus, a state of emergency was declared on November 8.<sup>6</sup> On November 16, Parliament extended it by three months.

The riots had neither ethnic nor religious character. Despite the fact that the majority of the rioters were of immigrant backgrounds had faced racial discrimination—especially regarding employment—the collective violence of November 2005 in France had largely social significance. This social violence, long prevalent, concerns so-called “difficult” or “underprivileged” youth (ranging from 14 to 30 years old) who are residents of working class districts. These youth face various difficulties—socioeconomic, educational, family, and personal. Some of them are capable of participating in collective violence, and others are already “known” to local police. They have been, and are still, the subject of numerous sociological studies, such as those conducted by French sociologists Stéphane Beaud and Michel Pialoux.<sup>7</sup> Basing their investigation on an emblematic case of a riot in a district of Montbéliard in July 2000, the authors highlighted the social significance of French urban violence. Namely, they established a correlation between the huge increase in unemployment and impoverishment inside these districts, the process of deconstruction of working classes, and the reappearance of the urban riots. Furthermore, the location of the riots of autumn 2005 indicates that the acts of violence occurred mainly in the areas officially classified as “Sensitive Urban Zones” (Zones Urbaines Sensibles, or ZUS). Here, very large families of North and Sub-Saharan African backgrounds live, the median income is less than national average, and young people often suffer from educational and professional failure.<sup>8</sup>

The survey, centered not only on the urban violence of November 2005 (in Val-Fourré) but also on the riots in November 2007 in Villiers-le-Bel, has demonstrated a very important phenomenon of disconnection—especially that of young violent actors from the institutional actors charged with ensuring social order. On the other hand, the residents of the two studied districts often justified this social violence as the mechanism that was expressed by the acceptance of the riots in their signification as a “primitive revolt.” More precisely, according to an idea proposed by the French sociologist Didier Lapeyronnie,<sup>9</sup> the riots are an illegal, unorganized expression that tries to achieve some political goals in the public sphere, aimed at finishing with the silent degradation of the local social environment.

### **Kondopoga: The Desire to Avoid the “French Catastrophe”**

The riots in Kondopoga, “the town of heroes” as several interlocutors called it, represented the biggest nationalist/racist riots in the contemporary history of the Russian Federation and also received widespread media coverage at the international level. It is crucial to

underscore that the local migrants face regular racial discrimination in employment, social institutions, and even collective violence—namely, the attacks of the former parachutists, including the ordinary residents in 1998 and 2003, on the local market where mainly migrants work.<sup>10</sup> Such everyday racial discrimination is not represented in the media (especially in Russia) at a level like the riots were. In this context, several phenomena exist: nationalist and racist tendencies among a significant part of population, the weakness of local civil society, and the inability of local authorities to guarantee public safety (constantly noted in surveys as “being closed” to citizens). The radical nationalists and members of the Movement Against Illegal Immigration, who came from Moscow to achieve their political goals, instrumentalized these phenomena.

The individuals defined as “radical nationalists” represent actors from the nationalist/racist riots of September 2006 and those involved in the attacks on the local market in 1998 and 2003. Indeed, comparisons were made between the local riots and those that occurred in France in November 2005. These individuals interpreted the French urban violence according to their social experience, which is linked to racial tensions developed in the local context. Roma (his nickname, not an indicator of ethnic identity, 36 years old, independent trader), when he was asked about the riots in Kondopoga and the reasons for his involvement in two nationalist/racist attacks on the market, at first mentioned that he was “against the presence of immigrants in Russia.” Then he used an “international” argument to justify his action by comparing the tensions and violence in Russia with those that occurred in France: “I realize that the politicians follow the overall tendency and everywhere there is a huge problem with immigration. In France, there is a real catastrophe. This is a war, you know that. We need to avoid such riots in our country.” In a similar way, Anatoli (37 years old, engineer, nationalist activist), who is a local informal representative of the Movement Against Illegal Immigration, compared the mentality of the “Caucasians” with the collective imaginary of those with African backgrounds living in France to explain the riots appeared locally: “I think that the ‘Caucasians’ behave as the ‘Africans’ or ‘Arabs’ do in France. They feel the weakness of the French population and they want to conquer the country. We have the same situation here. But if the ‘Caucasians’ meet with the powerful resistance they calm down.”

#### **Analysis of the Television Report “Kondopoga – Russian Revolt”**

As part of the survey led in Kondopoga, a television report was identified and analyzed. “Kondopoga – Russian Revolt,” a special edition of the program *One on Two (Odin na dvox)*, Regional Television REN TV, broadcast on September 10, 2006,<sup>11</sup> where one can observe that social actors themselves practice and produce an international comparison. Two producers of the program, Denis Litov and Igor Muratov, who express its ideological line, can be defined as nationalist and anti-liberal. They compare the riots in Kondopoga with those that took place in the French suburbs in 2005. Two weeks after the riots, these producers aired a special edition of their program that presented the testimonies of residents and interviews with Russian radical nationalists, including Aleksander Bielov, former leader of the Movement Against Illegal Immigration (DPNI). From his point of view, the riots of 2005 in France presented a “negative destructive example of migration policy in Western Europe.”<sup>12</sup> The report contains xenophobic (anti-immigration), racist (against “Arabs”), anti-democratic, and anti-liberal statements, with several manipulated parallels between the two riots. At first, the authors analyzed the French riots in the

misguided terms of a religious and ethnic conflict. Then, they underlined the threat of Islam, and more generally the threat of cultural difference, with the “cheap immigrant working force.” From the Russian perspective, such parallels are related to the religion of several populations from the Caucasus (mostly Chechens) and Central Asia.

### **The Radical Nationalists from Nizhny Novgorod**

During two months in Nizhny Novgorod (May–June 2010), the researchers undertook participative observation of two radical movements, one ultranationalist and the other anti-racist, in order to analyze the violent confrontation. The first group, defined as “radical nationalist” or “ultranationalist,” contains around 400 individuals between the ages of 13 and 35. This extremely heterogeneous group incorporates the following components: a small number of neo-Nazi skinheads (including ex-neo-Nazi skinheads); former activists of the National Bolshevik Party (NBP, also known as Nazbol), who left the structure of the NBP because of ideological change and the split in 2005 between Eduard Limonov and Aleksandr Dugin’s (most part of these individuals had found it too “democratic” and “liberal,” or not sufficiently nationalistic); local activists of the Movement Against Illegal Immigration (DPNI), many who defined themselves as “authentic Russian nationalists” or simply as “right-wing” (these auto-identifications are the most recurrent locally); “right-wing football fans” (FKNN local football club); and “right-wing ideologues.” More precisely, the observations within the group of radical nationalists took place on the occasion of several events: their local life (parties and everyday activities in the several districts of the city); the rehearsal of a hardcore music band “SS” (Second Sight), consisting of former neo-Nazi skinheads; a “Ska” music concert of ultranationalists groups; and three football matches of the FKNN (an informal bastion of local radical nationalists and the manifestation of the Movement Against Illegal Immigration), organized as a form of solidarity for the Russian miners. According to the analysis of the anti-racist movement, it is important to emphasize that contrary to the majority of representations in Russian and foreign media, this represents a very diverse group (around 80 individuals, aged between 13 and 30 years). It contains the anarchists grouped within Autonomous Action, the SHARPs (Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice), the RASHs (Red and Anarchist Skinheads), the “pure” anti-racists, punk/hardcore-rockers, and ecologists.

The empirical work indicates that several local radical nationalists referred to the French riots, occasionally in a quite elaborated form, as is seen in the case of Vovka (22 years old, conservatory student), one of the leaders of local ultranationalists:

Europe has managed to kill itself. Its governments have let the huge flow of migrants in. I do not think that the riots conducted by the Arabs is a normal thing. I reckon that they do not have the right to do such things. If they are in France they should behave like guests. We have a lot of similar problems. It is the same problem with the ‘ethnic question’ but namely we have a problem with the Caucasians and recently with the Chinese, and they have their problem with the Arabs and Blacks. I do not think so that everything is all right. I do not think that the white population accepts it in a peaceful way. Maybe I am wrong and the mentality of the Europeans is different. But I would not accept such a mess made by foreigners ... But if we talk about the reasons, I remember that the policemen did something first. I think that in the same way as here, the youth are in the conflict with the police. But on the other side, the conflict should be there because the Arabs and Blacks are responsible for the majority of crimes.

The other interviewed radical nationalist, Vadim (22 years old, security guard), is an activist of the Movement Against Illegal Immigration (DPNI). He interpreted the French riots within the typical Russian mechanism of the criminalization of ethnic minorities:

I understand very well what is going on in France. I have seen the riots on TV. It is cultural conflict and I do not want it in Russia. ... The Blacks want to fight for their living space. In the past, the French had courage to steal the land of the Black” in Africa. What I mean is colonization. But the French have recently become too weak. It is a big mistake ... They cannot be even called ‘Blacks.’ They have lost their ethnic identity, therefore they have become an ‘incomprehensible substance’ more or less linked to the criminal world from the ghettos. The difference with the Russian context is that the Russians do not indulge the mess made by foreigners like the French do ... Our organization [DPNI] is for a normal liberal democracy where the power is in the hands of the majority and not of the minority.

The case of Viktor (25 years old, employee at a funeral home, former neo-Nazi skin-head, current FKNN “right-wing football fan”) represents a common practice among the 19 locally interviewed ultranationalists. When he was asked about the French riots, he started to compare them to Russian tensions related to the general presence of the migrants in the city and in the country:

The French have invited all people from their former colonies. Now, I can see only one solution in that kind of situation. No immigrants, no problems. If they [the immigrants] want to come to our country and our authorities have nothing against it, they can come. But once they are here they should behave in a pleasant way. They should become Orthodox and they should start working and not abuse social welfare ... Generally once the immigrants are here we respect their opinions but they should pronounce them in a public space in their country and not here. The riots showed that it was too late to decrease the number of immigrants in the country. The French authorities should have measured the limits of the immigration in more realistic way. In Russia, in my opinion, the immigrants will ruin the country, as the government will. They [the officials] let them in. I do not think that the similar riots will emerge in Russia because our immigrants are not so poor as the French are. Here, they work on in construction or they clean up our streets. They realize that if they start messing around they will be expelled from this country and they will lose the opportunity to earn a living. There are no good jobs in their countries.

### Conclusions

Concluding emphasis should be put on the fact that in the majority of cases, the interpretation of the French riots of November 2005, established by several radical nationalists from Kondopoga and Nizhny Novgorod, was encouraged by our comparative approach. Nevertheless, from a methodological point of view, it was due to that kind of approach that the overall result was obtained. In this “global era,” through their spectatorial experience as the French sociologist Éric Macé<sup>13</sup> calls it, social actors “observe” themselves worldwide via the media. This research shows that the media plays a decisive role in the situation of weakness or absence not only of politicians, but also of social actors close to citizens, especially youth. The media intervenes in an extremely influential and massive way in social and cultural imaginary, and affects actions within the social environment. In spite of government control of the main media outlets—especially television—Russian society is situated under the influence of internationally comparable processes, such as the influence of the “global” media. Indeed, the most significant finding from this perspective

represents the interpretation of the French riots of November 2005 established “independently” from the research by Russian nationalists in the form of the analyzed television report “Kondopoga – Russian Revolt.” Though it seems clear that social tensions, including that concerning so-called urban violence in France, are important from the perspective of radical nationalists in Russia. The actual situation is linked to a range of complex phenomena, such as the rise of immigration and nationalism and the question of national identity; the entire debate regarding migration policy encourages the observations and interpretations of the European experience (such as the French one) by Russian citizens, including the most radical ones, who are directly involved in the process. These Russian nationalists, in some sense, think in European ways, and conceive of their country as part of a struggle against a common enemy to Europe. Paradoxically, according to our data these young chauvinists think of Russia as a part of Europe, not as having its own “Eurasian” identity.

This “European way of thinking,” from the interviewed subjects’ point of view, also has another very important dimension in relation to the survey conducted in Kondopoga; the case of the riots of September 2006 is very interesting in this respect. On the one hand, the nationalist/racist riots—which either debilitated or wholly demolished local social cohesion—demonstrate the failure of the processes of democratization in Russia. On the other hand, these riots led to a real “explosion” of local civil society and official creations. Five associations (Kondopoga: Town of Young People, Our Home Kondopoga, Rock Club “Kondor,” the “Faiz” Autonomous Organization of Uzbek Culture, the Youth Democratic Anti-Fascist Movement “Nashi” [“Ours!”]) and four official creations (the Department for Youth, Culture and Sport, the Youth Cultural Centre [built on the spot of a restaurant burned during the riots], the Council of Nongovernmental Organizations, the Centre for Social and Juridical Adaptation of Immigrants) have been founded. These local initiatives set up a posteriori illustrate that in the event of local authorities’ inability to guarantee public security in provincial areas of Russia, citizens can take responsibility for social order in a democratic manner. The most active part of the population, including members of ethnic minorities, proved that they were not crushed by local collective violence, and they demonstrated creative and democratic attitudes. These two faces of the riot, one destructive and other creative, were expressed by Luda (56 years old, president of an NGO created after the acts of violence in Kondopoga): “I think that at first to apply a ‘Western lifestyle’ we must learn what it means to live in democracy. Western values are not only related to consumption. There is no democracy here. We have not yet learned how to like each other. So, what to say when it comes to migrants!”

## NOTES

1. The three-year project (2010–2012), which the City Hall of Paris funds, was conducted by the researchers from the Centre for Russian, Caucasian and Central Asian Studies (CERCEC–EHESS/CNRS).

2. Russia is a federation that consists of 83 federal subjects (members of the federation): 21 republics, 46 provinces, nine territories, one autonomous province, four autonomous districts, and two federal cities (Moscow and St. Petersburg).

3. Alain Touraine, *La voix et le regard* (Paris: Seuil, 1978).

4. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

5. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

6. Véronique Le Goaziou et Laurent Mucchielli, *Quand les banlieues brûlent...Retour sur les émeutes de novembre 2005* (Paris: La Découverte, 2006).

7. Stéphane Beaud, Michel Pialoux, *Violences urbaines, violences sociales : genèse des nouvelles classes dangereuses* (Paris: Hachette Littératures, 2005).

8. Hugues Lagrange, Marco Oberti (dir.), *Émeutes urbaines et protestations. Une singularité française* (Paris, Presses de Sciences Po: 2006).

9. Didier Lapeyronnie, "Révolte primitive dans les banlieues françaises. Essai sur les émeutes de l'automne 2005," *Déviance et Société* 30, no 4 (2006): 431-448.

10. Lukasz Jurczynszyn, *Violences urbaines. Une comparaison: France, Russie, Pologne*. Thèse de doctorat, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), Paris, 201. Available on DVD and on the program's website, <http://www.2-1.ru>.

12. "Kondopoga - Russian revolt," the special edition of program One on two (in Russian: "Odn na dvox," Regional Television REN TV, broadcast on September 10, 2006, available at <http://www.2-1.ru>).

13. Éric Macé, *Les imaginaires médiatiques. Une sociologie postcritique des médias* (Éditions Amsterdam, 2006).



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